



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

The federally designated Parent Training and Information Center for Washington DC

**Testimony of
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Committee of the Whole and on Education Joint Budget Oversight Hearing:
Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)

Tuesday, April 9, 2019

Good morning Chairman Grosso, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. I am Rochanda Hiligh-Thomas, a District resident, parent and Executive Director of Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (AJE). Today I am testifying on behalf of AJE.

AJE is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for the District of Columbia. We provide free training, resources, individual assistance and supports to parents and youth in navigating the public education system, with a focus on students with disabilities. Our mission is to equip and empower parents and youth to be effective advocates to ensure the receipt of appropriate educational services. Annually we train over 1,000 parents, students and professionals and serve over 700 families through direct services.

Through our intake process, where we have enrolled over 400 families thus far this school year, and our collaboration with other children, youth and family serving organizations through coalitions such as the Every Student Every Day Coalition (ESED) and the Special Education Advocacy Coalition (SEAC), we see the issues that impact children's access to an equitable education. I highlight today some of those issues and the budget considerations the Council should make to ensure all children have access to an equitable education for improved academic, career and life outcomes.

1. *Transportation.*

I testified at OSSE's oversight hearing the complaints parents have shared about OSSE provided transportation at the beginning of the school year and throughout with late pick up, late drop off, no pick and more, and the significant impact of those incidents on families including the loss of employment for parents and the lack of access to a free appropriate public education for students.¹

I indicated our appreciation with OSSE's efforts to address this issue including meeting with us and other special education advocacy coalition members and the steps it has indicated it is taking to address problematic areas. However, as I stated to "dramatically shift the trajectory of growth for students with disabilities" students must first make it to through the school house doors. We think the overall increase of 4.5 million from FY19 to FY20 to the student transportation budget, specifically in the areas of training coordination and logistics and routing and scheduling, is an important step to resolving the transportation woes that negatively impact students and families. We request the Council support the budget increase in this area and to continuously push OSSE to ensure that every child is picked up and dropped off when and where they are supposed to and receive a FAPE.

2. *Student Fair Access to School Act.*

To effectively implement the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018 (SFASA) with fidelity, it is imperative that the Council ensures it is fully funded. Under SFASA, OSSE is required to provide LEAs with needed additional supports for interventions that allow them to reduce their use of exclusionary discipline. However, this requirement only becomes effective upon the receipt of funding. Without the required funding of at least 20 million dollars to not only support OSSE's requirements, but the requirements of LEAs to limit exclusionary discipline practices in their schools over the next two school years, the purpose of SFASA will be undermined. We continue to receive regular calls from parents about school discipline issues. While the limits on the number

¹ Washington Post Article. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-parents-say-buses-for-special-education-students-are-unreliable-at-start-of-year/2018/09/02/69b2b3e6-ab04-11e8-b1da-ff7faa680710_story.html?utm_term=.09fd6b907dea

of days students can receive an out-of-school suspension is currently in effect, that does not address the change in culture and climate within schools necessary to truly create welcoming, safe schools that take a trauma-informed approach to supporting students most in need.

It is impossible to consider SFASA funding in a vacuum. Other advocates and coalitions partners have spoken about the need to adequately fund school-based mental health services and other programs. Along those same lines of what's truly needed to support our children and schools, we too request the Council to ensure there are investments in trauma-informed training for all school staff, full-time mental health professionals and staff to provide needed mental health supports and services in schools, and high-quality social emotional learning programs and evidence-based curriculum.

3. Students in the Care of DC Coordinating Committee Act of 2018

Young people in the care of DC (or those involved in DC's juvenile and adult criminal justice systems or foster care system) face significant barriers to education, and struggle with systemic school push-out and lack of access to educational opportunities. Recognizing that educational attainment was not equitable in the District, especially relating to the court-involved population, Councilmember Grosso convened a working group of governmental agency heads, community members, and advocates and attorneys to address barriers to education. He memorialized the findings in a report that set forth three legislative fixes and over 40 policy solutions to improving education for court-involved young people in the District.

One legislative recommendation was the establishment of an interagency coordinating committee that would oversee the education of young people and serve as a collaborative body, uniting agency and advocacy efforts and dismantling siloed agency practices. In July 2018, Councilmember Grosso introduced Students in the Care of DC Coordinating Committee Act of 2018. The purpose of this Committee is to "identify challenges and resolve issues that students in detainment, commitment, incarceration, and foster care face in order to improve educational outcomes." The Act was signed in February 2019.

The implications of this are significant. This will be the first time that there is a body to monitor education for court-involved young people. The Act provides for two staff positions neither of which was funded by the Mayor's proposed FY2020 budget. With a Fiscal Impact Statement of only \$213,900, this must be funded. If we want to continue on the path toward equitable access to education for all residents, this must be funded.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions.